

# The Personal of the Political



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## *Transgenerational Dialogues in Contemporary European Feminisms*

Edited by

Elżbieta H. Oleksy,  
Aleksandra M. Różalska  
and Marek M. Wojtaszek

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## INTRODUCTION

# THE PERSONAL OF THE POLITICAL: TRANSGENERATIONAL DIALOGUES IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN FEMINISMS

ELŻBIETA H. OLEKSY,  
ALEKSANDRA M. RÓŻALSKA  
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### **The Political**

In the era of radicalization of political ideologies in Europe (as the 2014 elections to the European Parliament clearly evidence), long-lasting societal remnants of the economic breakdown (resulting in the implementation of austere measures and budget tightening of social spending), neoliberalist consolidation of capitalist values (manifested on the one hand in the rampant commodification of, and trafficking in, organic and inorganic life, and on the other, in the cultural epidemic of the hyper-individualist agency), it is ethically relevant to critically rethink the meaning and role of European feminisms and challenges they have to locally and transnationally confront nowadays.

In the face of ubiquitous beliefs about feminism having become “undone,” as Angela McRobbie puts it in her book *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), the reconceptualization of the place and priorities of feminist politics within and outside of academia is urgently needed. The popularization of the so-called *faux-feminisms* of various sorts assuming attained emancipation in the present-day neoliberal environment of advanced capitalism—exemplified by statutory cooptation of women’s activist potential, patriarchal appropriation of feminist gains, as well as ideological instrumentalization of the concept of gender—calls for close examination, critical reflection, and creative counter-strategies. Bearing in mind that the patterns of oppression still prevail, becoming even more and

more insidious and complex, it is all the more necessary to identify, scrutinize, and contest the vicissitudes of the dominant apparatus of control and subjugation, and to demystify the purportedly gender-inclusive operations of the regime.

The present political arena in Europe shaped by a significant bipolarization, which inscribes itself in the historical dialectic as a motor of development, leads to an escalation of various antagonisms and hostile attitudes in different spheres of life. Such a dichotomized political framework generates discrepant responses ranging from temporary strategic dormancy as a means of survival (Agamben 1999), conscious withdrawal from political participation resulting in a peculiar *dés-intéressement*, through radicalization of conflict as a reaction to a strengthening of the state power (Badiou and Žižek 2009; Mouffe 2005), to minor initiatives driven by the need to redefine political activity altogether beyond dialectic by reclaiming the place of the personal experience and its situated perspective in the pursuit of an affirmative and sustainable existence.

These tendencies can be observed in the present-day context of European feminisms which need to renegotiate their objectives in different geopolitical locations. On the one hand, one witnesses a generational gap in the understanding of the necessity of feminism and the ongoing validity of its postulates with younger generations contesting feminist adherence, at the same time mindlessly taking advantage of its gains. With capitalism recently revealing its skillful capacity to transform and adapt to the changing conditions, the system has become cognizant of the marketing potential of emancipation, fooling masses to subject to its consumerist imperative. Totally derailing the feminist ideal of critical agency, capitalism reduces it to the hedonistic self-execution of the right to buy and consume. Furthermore, this very same logic expresses itself in instrumental maneuvers of feminist accomplishments and a successive incorporation of women's issues into the capitalist state policies. This not infrequently brings about effects contradictory to the assumed feminist goals, thus creating a paradoxical situation whereby the policy of gender mainstreaming reproduces structural inequalities. In consequence, this becomes a practical argument for reactive criticism of, and accusations towards, feminism in general. Moreover, patriarchal system tends more and more often to revert cynically to anti-discrimination discourse and its emancipatory tools in order to assume its position as a victim. Cunningly appropriating the equal opportunities terminology, it diverts public attention away from the actual discrimination of minorities, thus mocking feminist ideals. On the other hand, among older generations of feminists

increasingly audible is the sense of a certain loss of their “daughters” mixed with a pedagogical failure in transmitting feminist ideals onwards and interwoven with a peculiar feeling of their values being betrayed.

Taking the above and the difficulty in establishing fruitful transgenerational dialogue into consideration, a number of authors have drawn attention to the wasting of political energy on the part of younger generations which creates a symptomatic and overwhelming aura of waiting for the political moment. On the popular social level this atmosphere drastically minimizes self-identification with feminism (if not with its selected aims), all the while fostering a process of self-enclosing of already established women’s initiatives, thus impeding the debate on the vision of the future feminist solidarity.

The process of biopolarization has also salient implications in the social dimension, which additionally necessitates working out effective ways of instigating transgenerational communication and cooperation. The aftermath of the series of economic crises on the one hand witnesses social turmoil generating various responses (e.g., nationalist sentiments, resentment towards immigrants, religious fanaticism, fundamentalist movements), and on the other hand, struggle to come to terms and cope with their traumatic consequences. These efforts, of course, take on different forms ranging from statutory and institutional actions to grassroot undertakings aiming to recuperate and resolve the social tensions. The dominant state apparatus resorts to various ideologies (demographic policy, reproductive rights, religious tradition, anti-immigration sentiments) in effectively handling the public discontent by silencing the negative reverberations of socio-economic tremors. Crisis, however, aside from its oblivious destructive repercussions, is capable of stimulating a wider social reflection on the *status quo* out of which emerges critical awareness of its dysfunctions and areas in need of thoroughgoing examination. Contemporary feminist analyses (Figart and Warnecke 2013; Boris and Klein 2012; Woodward et al. 2011; Thompson 2008; Young 2004; Healy 2000) emphasize an urgent need to promote social responsibility for the future welfare and wellbeing of the European communities, arguing that the state cannot be a sole initiator and beneficiary of the transition. The above circumstances dramatically brought to light the oppressive character of the established (patriarchal) social contract with its hierarchical structures, omissions, and abuses, underlining the necessity to radically reconceptualize it and rearrange its social bonds.

## The Personal

Present-day social imaginary appears monopolized by the regime of the objective-obsessed pragmatism and mercantilist praxis expropriating intersubjective relations of trust and empathy, and reducing them to dispassionate and opportune exchange of interests. Fighting the dominant imaginative poverty and patriarchal corset, local feminist endeavors abound in attempts to create alternative formulas of social arrangements and new ways of relating to one another. This volume offers a range of theoretical and practical propositions of how certain grassroots initiatives contribute to a reconstitution of the social contract in various spheres (e.g., pedagogy, social work, education, women's and minority rights, non-normative sexualities, art as/and therapy).

Achieving social transition requires a great deal of additional effort and commitment, which oftentimes entails painful reworking of one's own personal experience and relations with the environment. Contemporary patriarchal system, in wake of recent socio-economic turbulences, consistently invests in the evacuation of pain in order to calm the social climate and appease the public, creating a palliating illusion of the reality free of traumas and death. In this context, there is need for feminist politics to rethink the sense and status of pain away from victimization on the level of identity towards an indispensable catalyst of any social transformation.

Dominant culture applies different methods to soften the experience of suffering, creating a peculiar anesthesia and causing us to gradually unlearn how to endure and share pain in a compassionate manner. In a similar vein, patriarchal culture is undergoing a curious metamorphosis by adapting its image to the changing circumstances notably by sublimating and estheticizing its ideological apparatus. Nowhere is it better manifested than in the representational layer of cultural communication which triggers a proliferation of portrayals of ostensibly emancipated women and virtuous men (Young 2003). Strikingly enough, contemporary culture promotes a "spornosexual" (Simpson 2014) hegemonic ideal of masculinity concealing a violence-driven pattern combining porn esthetics with brutal combative sports imagery (e.g., David Beckham, Cristiano Ronaldo, Channing Tatum), whereas the socio-political firmament is replete with caricatured and demented masculine types, such as Silvio Berlusconi, Vladimir Putin, or Dominique Strauss-Kahn. The process of estheticization permits patriarchy to become less and less visible and tangible, which calls for greater vigilance and critical sensibility. This demands a different acute perception and analytical skills

to be able to discern the insidious oppressive operations wrapped up and expressed in an esthetic, eye-appealing way.

The question, however, arises to what extent these new cultural manifestations—blatantly visible in, for instance, music industry symptomatically exemplified by, among others, Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Miley Cyrus, or Madonna—can reawaken the timely significance of “the f-word” beyond the consumerist veneers and inspire genuine affective understanding of the ongoing validity of feminist politics amid the younger generations who opportunistically and mindlessly devour the gains achieved by previous generations of feminists all the while remaining unconscious of struggle and sacrifice indispensable for social transformation (Gay 2014; Danielle 2014; Sieczkowski 2014). This peculiar politics of forgetting—promoted by the present-day capitalist regime, most invasively expressed through systematic estheticization, which is programmed to create an illusion of there being nothing to fight for any longer—precludes the possibility of intergenerational dialogue leading to grave dissonances at the level of communication and identification. Therefore, a sense of wasting of feminist political strength is widely experienced, which motivates an urgent need to rediscover the vital power of feminist past, reappropriate its virtually resilient potential, and to put to novel uses adequate to the changing social relations. As the collection of texts assembled in this volume illustrate, a possible alternative can be found in, curiously enough, the critical and strategic deepening of the meaning of esthetic (i.e., sensible) experience. Through a more affective—compassionate and inspirational—reworking of one’s relations with others, the intergenerational dissonances can be overcome. This necessarily entails a reconfiguration of the founding principles of the social contract, whereby in lieu of the dualism of individual versus society there is a novel image of agency removed from a monolithic conception of identity and opening up to a recognition of one’s own unique singularity remaining in constant resonance with the complexity of socio-cultural forces. This, in turn, calls for working out a different ethical perspective capable of accounting for one’s esthetic functioning in the system yet distancing from the mode of capitalist procedure of estheticization of patriarchy.

Given the above, the book seeks to renew academic and political interest in the epistemological tradition of context-created knowledge as an apt response to a strategic need to reevaluate its validity, which is motivated by a critical observation of the transition of power structures and which feminist scholarship and politics have to confront in the aftermath of the current political and economic perturbations within the

dominant system. Growing from an involved self-reflective research, the collection of essays emphasizes the importance of such approaches that retrieve the original sense of theory which lies in empirically grounded observation. Therefore, the majority of the texts gain inspiration from, and further pursue, personal narrative as a feminist method of critical knowledge production. In doing so, this volume unfolds the message expressed in its title underlining the significance of the personal experience for feminist political involvement. Bringing together authors from diverse geopolitical locations, the book constitutes a forum for fruitful encounters across generations and national and cultural differences, which contributes to a better understanding of the complexities of patriarchal ideology and to the creation of a more sustainable communal future.

### **The Personal of the Political**

Importantly, this book is inspired by the international conference “Intersecting Feminisms: Theory, Politics, and Activism,” held in November 2012 to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Women’s Studies Centre (WSC) at the University of Łódź, Poland. As one of the first academic centers for women’s and gender studies in Central and Eastern Europe, WSC—founded in 1992—has successfully survived the turbulent years of political and institutional transformations in Poland. Facing the challenges of the times, it has labored to promote the visibility of women and gender in the field of research, pedagogy and politics, widening social perception of, and advancing respect for, difference. The conference meeting brought together feminist scholars, artist, activists, and politicians and constituted a timely platform of exchange of ideas and debate on the challenges that European feminisms are facing nowadays in different professional and personal contexts. Responding to the oft-recurrent critical conference voices diagnosing prevalent generational dissonances, this volume accentuates an urgent need for an intensification of transgenerational, transcultural, transnational, and transdisciplinary dialogue which will contribute to a better understanding of the current condition of feminist theories and practices in the face of recent crises and their social, political, and economic ramifications. Consequently, the book emerges as a compilation of critical essays addressing the complexity of ethical issues and political dilemmas that require bridging different situated perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches. It offers a collection of chapters introducing situated perspectives which adopt intersectional optics to analyze the transformations of contemporary socio-

political realm and reflect research priorities within the present-day feminist scholarship.

The book comprises four thematic parts which map the terrain of issues relevant to feminist political and academic agenda that corresponds to the conference's main focus on situated knowledges. The opening part, *Intersectionality: from Theory to Practice*, includes four essays: (1) "Emotional Body, Healing, and Art: A Journey of a Woman" by Elzbieta Kazmierczak, (2) "Interrogating Difference: Deconstructing the Divide Between Theory and Practice Through Frames of Oppression" by Sarah Johnstone, (3) "Intersectionality in Women's Human Rights: From Social Criticism to the Development of Capabilities" by Marina Calloni, and (4) "The Role of Biographical Narrative in Critical and Feminist Social Work" by Natalija Mažeikienė. Analyzing local circumstances of women's experiences, they probe hermeneutical and political potential of intersectionality as a research method and heuristic devise.

In her own art-inspired opening essay, Elzbieta Kazmierczak presents and analyzes her artwork in the context of gender and women's issues. She discusses how her artistic creations have come to be as well as what they mean to her personally and as public communications for the empowerment of women. Dealing in her artwork with gender-based violence, Kazmierczak explains how image-making fulfills therapeutic, aesthetic, and semiotic functions. In this essay, she mainly focuses on psychological abuse in male-to-female intimate adult relationships. Her particular emphasis is on the emotional-cognitive-ethical growth that results from dealing with challenging life crises, such as overcoming abuse. Kazmierczak's artworks, whose indicative examples are interwoven into the narrative, depict the emotional reality of persistent deliberate coercion, control, and disempowerment. First, she introduces her series of works titled "A Journey of a Woman," followed by a self-portrait drawing by a woman who has been abused. Second, she specifies what "the things that were done to her" mean in legal terms. In concentrating on personal growth and the emancipatory impact of reaching out to other wise women whom similar life crises have befallen turning their lives around, Kazmierczak ends with a doable ten-step program for the empowerment of women. By employing a first-person narrative to construct a fictionalized autoethnographic account of overcoming violence in marriage, she expands her personal life story with other women's who have been abused in order to create a composite portrait that is representative of many women's experiences.

Sarah Johnstone commences her essay with a salient observation that gender and development emerges today as a sub-field where the contentions

within contemporary international feminism are strongly felt, and where solidarity around gender-based oppression has been both claimed and challenged. Different perspectives have been linked to a divide between theory and practice, where theory has been associated with “gender” and complexity, while practice has focused on “women” and universality. This, as she contends, has prompted calls from theory, practice, and policy to bridge this division. The essay examines one such “bridge”—a network of gender and development academics and practitioners based in Sweden. The aim of Johnstone’s study is to examine how the network members constructed meaning of gender-based oppression, the discursive effects of these representations, as well as how their implications affect the divide between theory and practice. Employing a discourse analysis as a method of investigation of both group and individual interviews with members, the chapter demonstrates that gender-based oppression is commonly conflated with gender equality, thus pointing to a hegemonic national discourse. Johnstone’s research reveals that women tended to be represented as unequal to the male norm. What is more, the importance of acknowledging contextual differences constitutes another common element. Consequently, the author argues that “recognizing” these differences serves to essentialize some of them (e.g., gender, regional) in a way that excludes a consideration of the hierarchical relations between gender and development experts and the objects of their theory and practice. With this in mind, Johnstone concludes by insisting on the need to interrogate assumptions of difference and sameness whether between theory and practice or in feminist engagements of intersectionality in general.

Being one of the most oft-quoted and fruitful concepts in gender studies, intersectionality, as Marina Calloni observes in her essay, has provoked innumerable international debates regarding its possible meanings, applications, and consequences. Globally, intersectionality is meant as a critical, theoretical, and sociological proposition, which refers to diverse forms of marginalization and underrepresentation of individuals and social groups. The political strength of the intersectional approach, Calloni insists, lies in its capacity to express and account for overlapping forms of discrimination in various contexts of life. However, as the author argues, the “discrimination gap,” that is the repetition of a status of minority and disadvantage, can become an intrinsic limit, if a counter-factual perspective is not adopted. Consequently, as Calloni claims, the hermeneutic notion of intersectionality can potentially remain trapped in a self-reproducing discriminatory discourse—without the possibility to offer any political proposition to fight unfair human conditions—unless it critically acknowledges the extant normative principles governing the

established order of things and values. The author accentuates that such a critical basis can be found (1) *ex-positivo*, in the idea of reciprocal respect and recognition among human beings and (2) *ex-negativo*, in the elimination of any form of humiliating and inhuman treatment. In her essay, Calloni aims to further develop the concept of intersectionality which, in her opinion, should be understood as an analytical, prognostic, and pliable tool. Intersectionality, in Calloni's view, implicitly and interactively involves creation, transformation, and development of human—both individual and collective—capabilities, thus expanding the human rights discourse.

The focal terrain of exploration in the next essay by Natalija Mažeikienė is biographical narrative which she proposes to read as a research strategy and means of empowerment in social work. Arguing that the outcomes of biographical research developed in critical feminist social work and feminist social policy create a possibility to understand the impact of social structures on an individual's life, the author explores their potential for improving society, promoting social change, for instance, by amending social policy. Following the idea of structural critical work about the necessity to dismantle the false consciousness of the oppressed, Mažeikienė posits biographical narrative as embedded into radical counseling, feminist therapy, and awareness raising actions. The aim of such biographical therapy and biographical work is to help social work clients reveal the situation within their consciousness—thoughts and feelings (e.g., guilt, helplessness, irresponsibility)—as false, as the operation of dominant discourses. Drawing inspiration from post-structuralist philosophers (i.e., Michel Foucault, Judith Butler), Mažeikienė discusses selected ideas of postmodern social work which, as she contends, introduce new aspects into interpretation of biographical narrative. In particular, conceptions of the subject and subjection, power of normative discourses, internalized power through surveillance and normalization, as well as performativity foster a critical understanding of the status and role of the (speaking) subject in biographical narrative. The author further concludes that this interpretative strategy can strengthen resistance to normalizing discourses and normative biographies, and make it possible for an individual to develop their own local and contextualized identity in and through biographical narrative. In doing so, Mažeikienė explores and promotes—both in (academic) theory and in (social work) practice—the idea of intersectionality as a useful tool for interrogating the notion of identity, which exposes it as a result of multiple intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, as well as local, cultural, and social configurations.

The authors collected in the second part, *Feminist Interventions in Education*, investigate the context of education in two European countries: (1) Hungary (“Mainly Feminine. Teacher’s Career and Educational Aspirations Based on the ‘Graduate Follow-up Research 2010’” by Edina Kovács) and (2) Sweden (“Quotas for Men in University: Breaking the Stereotype in European Union Law and Swedish Law” by Antónia Barradas), as well as (3) the popular culture’s pedagogical failure to question nationalism and patriarchy in the Polish society (“Pop-messianism and the Politics of Death in *Days of Honor*: Feminist Critique of the Dominant Polish Historical Memory” by Aleksandra M. Róžalska).

Teaching is a gendered profession, flatly states Edina Kovács in her contribution. Expectations addressed toward teachers are strongly influenced by cultural images of gender roles and stereotypes. Consequently, in her essay Kovács sets her objective to identify the factors which influence teachers’ career choices, aspirations for further education, training, and access to leadership/management positions. On the one hand, the author observes, there exist entrenched gender stereotypes, whereas, on the other hand, there are standardized requirements of the teaching profession. Kovács analyzes the data from the “Graduate Follow-up Research 2010,” a Hungarian national survey, which examines the higher education students who completed their undergraduate or graduate studies in 2007. Not surprisingly, the results reveal a high percentage of phenomena motivated by gender stereotypes among teachers. The author critically exposes numerous patterns which emerge, for instance, in how the role of an individual’s sex fundamentally defines career opportunities, gendered distribution of skills, or feminine characteristics of the highly feminized teaching profession (e.g., “interacting with others”).

For her part, Antónia Barradas approaches the issue of quotas for the under-represented sex in the area of higher education in Sweden. Her study is mostly a legal analysis of the status quo, enriched at times with sociological evaluations. Whilst in the first part Barradas analyzes the issue of gender equality in higher education from a human rights perspective, in the second part she investigates gender equality in the area of higher education from the perspective of European Union Law. Finally, as an example she delves into the Swedish experience regarding quotas for the under-represented sex in university in order to expose the—not infrequently paradoxical—results of the application of these positive action measures. Importantly, Barradas poses a question whether or not men are discriminated against by the law and by society in the field of educational opportunities. She concludes by raising yet another issue of “gendering” of men in today’s societies which she relates to the trend of

men's underachievement on an academic level. In doing so, the author signals a break from a stereotypical view that does not see men as a "vulnerable group" in the area of higher education.

In her essay, Aleksandra M. Różalska argues that two rudimentary elements, i.e., the politics of death and the messianic image of Poland's victimhood, co-construct its prevailing historical memory, eliminating any possibility of celebrating nationhood and national identity in a more affirmative and joyful way, and of going beyond the limiting moral triptych of "God-Honor-Fatherland." In this context, she examines the ways in which the history of the World War II and its direct aftermath are reflected in contemporary popular culture texts, focusing on the television series *Days of Honor* that has attracted a lot of viewers, especially the younger ones, throughout its seven-season airtime (2008–2014). However, as Różalska asserts, despite its adoption of a new action movie-like style, the show in fact reinforces the dominant assumptions about the history of Poland and its history-based politics, and fails to offer a different representation of Poland's participation in the WWII. It is also unsuccessful, she claims, in adequately addressing Polish anti-Semitism and incidents of complicity in crimes against Jews (also of the members of the Home Army) and in representing women beyond the traditional roles of victims, Polish Mothers, or obstacles to men's dutiful service "to the glory of our Fatherland." Consequently, Różalska critically reads *Days of Honor* as a "pop-messianic" show of a wasted pedagogical potential. In her view, the series inscribes itself in the patriarchal celebration of necropolitics, thus effectively dispensing with a public and pedagogical mission of exposing the complexities and ambiguities of the World War II—such as the Polish participation in the anti-Nazi conspiracy and conflicting positions toward the Warsaw Uprising—particularly to the younger generations of viewers.

The third part, *Discursive Bodies*, assembles two studies dedicated to a historical (re)construction of women's relation to their bodies (1) shaped by the ideology of motherhood in seventeenth-century Rome (Alice Corte's "Women's Bodies. A Medical, Religious, and Political Matter") and (2) determined by the socio-cultural perception of contraceptive methods as illustrated by Agata Ignaciuk in her comparative analysis of the Polish and Spanish women's popular magazines of the 1960s and 1970s ("Discourses on the Contraceptive Pill in Spanish and Polish Magazines for Women").

The meaning of women's bodies has changed dramatically over the centuries, argues Alice Corte in her essay, in which she sets off to investigate how motherhood has operated as a central issue in the

historical production of the concept of “woman,” remaining all along an ideological battlefield. The author observes that even though images of the mother and her roles had evolved, their importance in past societies was unquestionable. It was only in the Enlightenment, as Corte reminds, when the emergence of the middle class justified the complementarity paradigm which ascribed women in general, and mothers in particular, to private sphere. Tracing the pre-modern discourses and apparatuses of motherhood (such as medical science), Corte discusses two examples of noble married women living in seventeenth-century Rome, i.e., Eugenia Spada (1639–1717) and Marie Mancini (1639–1715). As motherhood continues to be regarded as *natural* in contemporary societies—which surges, for instance, in public debates on abortion, eugenics, or euthanasia—the author puts the concept of motherhood in contrast to its historical imageries and discovers certain patterns of change.

Critically looking back at the 1960s and 1970s, Agata Ignaciuk analyzes the debates on the oral contraceptive pill in Francoist Spain and state-socialist Poland by focusing on the representations of the drug in two women’s magazines: Spanish *Ama* and Polish *Przyjaciółka*. Reconstructing the historical situation in Francoist Spain, where sale and advertising of all contraceptive methods was banned by law between 1941 and 1978, Ignaciuk reminds that oral contraceptives started circulating in the early 1960s and were promoted not as birth control methods but therapeutic drugs for gynecological problems. Even though, as the author claims, in the 1960s, *Ama*’s readers were disabused of this family planning method in compliance with the conservative Catholic ideal of a large family propagated by the magazine, a decade later the magazine’s treatment of the pill reflected the already increasing social normalization of its use. Conversely, in state-socialist Poland, as Ignaciuk informs, while no legal prohibition on the circulation of contraceptives existed, the deficiencies of state-controlled and centrally planned economy prevented contraceptives from being distributed on a larger scale and procrastinating the introduction of the pill until late 1960s. *Przyjaciółka*’s readers were regularly informed about this and other contraceptive methods. Poland’s leading gynecologists, quoted as experts in the magazine, praised the pill as a good and safe contraceptive method. However, as Ignaciuk concludes, the positive image of the pill was not successful in seriously affecting women’s contraceptive practices, which was due to the permanent supply shortages preventing them from choosing the pill regularly. Emphatically, abortion remained the main method of birth control in state-socialist Poland.

In the final part, *Subaltern Sexualities*, the contributors embark upon a project of revisiting the conception of non-normative sexualities, reconceptualizing their place in the Polish socio-political landscape of today, and reflecting upon the changing cultural representations of (1) asexuals (Anna Kurowicka's "The Queer Identity for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Asexual Experience in the Sexual World"), (2) lesbians (Marta Olasik's "Lesbian Invisibility and Gay and Lesbian Activism: A Queer Insight"), and (3) (homo)sexual desire (Marek Wojtaszek's "Limits of Fluidity. *Floating Skyscrapers* and a Pathosophy of Desire").

One of the most basic assumptions about human nature has long been that human beings are driven by the need for food and for sex. Therefore, as Anna Kurowicka argues, the emergence of asexual community at the cusp of the twenty-first century came as a surprise for social scientists. Asexuals, people who experience no sexual attraction, have started to build an online community and form a cohesive sexual identity inspired by the emancipation of other LGBTQ movements. In her essay, Kurowicka provides a brief overview of the place of asexuality in the field of queer studies, followed by a critical discussion of selected portrayals of asexuals in contemporary culture. First, she explores the socio-cultural circumstances conducive to the constitution of asexual identity at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Given that definitions of asexuality are constantly being negotiated and (con)tested within/by the community, the author—by exploring their pedigree and meaning—sheds light onto their (con-structive) nature. Employing Ela Przybylo's idea of "sexuociety," Kurowicka analyzes the challenges that asexuals face in contemporary Western societies. Finally, she lays out some methodological and theoretical difficulties inherent in studying cultural representations of a sexual identity based around a "lack" of sexuality. Asexuality emerges not only as a fascinating cultural and social phenomenon, but also as one that can offer novel insights into human sexuality in general, and revise extant perspectives on the formation of sexual identity in particular.

Marta Olasik's essay offers a critical reflection on the role of gay and lesbian activism in creating the social image and existential framework of Polish non-heterosexuals of any kind, with separate consideration of the L (lesbian) part of—much too popular—the LGBT notion. Rooted in queer studies and perspective, Olasik has been observing, with growing concern, some of the recent strategies of LG activists in Poland which she examines in greater detail, attempting to evaluate the direction in which they are going. Identifying herself as a queer researcher, Olasik confesses being particularly confused by two events, i.e., proud activist articles by a prominent Campaign Against Homophobia member on the one hand,

and 2013 one percent campaign by Warsaw Lambda Association on the other. The essay is the author's testament to that confusion. Stating the inadequacy of the Polish LG activism to the current situation of non-heteronormative members of the society, and explaining how it can in fact support the ongoing discrimination against them, in her criticism thereof Olasik pinpoints the symptomatic omission of non-heterosexual women. Lesbians not only seem to be invisible in Western culture and especially in Poland, but also their existence is additionally prevented from being appropriately recognized by lesbian and gay activists themselves. Olasik reverts to queer studies scholarship which can prove inspirational and effective in improving the strategies of defense of non-heteronormative members of the society, increase the visibility of lesbians, and help the activist organizations develop and promote a much-needed and more adequate social image of non-heterosexuality.

In his essay "Limits of Fluidity. *Floating Skyscrapers* and a Pathosology of Desire," Marek Wojtaszek observes that roughly for the last two years Polish public sphere has witnessed an unprecedented visibility of non-heterosexual minorities, forcing the still relatively young democracy to verify its elementary structural tenets and cultural values. The increasing escalation of acts of verbal incivility and physical violence perpetrated against sexual minorities deeply undermines (the morals of) the established order, demanding a radical revision of the concept of citizenship. The social-political turmoil—triggered in early 2013 by the series of revelations about the plague of pedophilic molestation within the (Polish) Catholic Church with its local hierarchs' preposterous rejoinders transposing "the blame" onto children, "gender, and its sexualizing ideology"—saw diverse acts of public vandalism, ignorant political belittling and mockery of sexual minorities' postulates, intellectual "bashing" by neo-fascist and nationalist groups in academia, and eruptions of violence during manifestations, causing one to ruminate not only about the immediate political solutions but also, and perhaps even more importantly, about ethical ramifications of the sexual reshaping of the Polish society and visions of its future. Discussing the recent tumultuous public events in terms of desire, Wojtaszek proposes to view them as symptoms of an underlying cultural *dis-ease* of/with sexuality. Diagnosing the current politicization of desire as an effect of its traditionally Western (and patriarchal) association with lack and pleasure, the author advocates—via his philosophically framed discussion of the concept of phantasm—that a more radical shift in experience and understanding of desire is needed in order to construct a more communicatively enriching and sustainable ethical-political vision of change. Embarking upon

a symptomatological reading of the film *Floating Skyscrapers* (dir. Tomasz Wasilewski, 2013), which he takes as a timely intervention into the public debate on sexuality in contemporary Poland, Wojtaszek concludes by developing a pathosophical, film-inspired, intimate image of desire capable of both eschewing the dominant system's errors and traps, resisting its lures, as well as inspiring further ethical-political dialogue.

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# **PART ONE**

## **INTERSECTIONALITY: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE**



## CHAPTER ONE

# EMOTIONAL BODY, HEALING, AND ART: A JOURNEY OF A WOMAN

ELZBIETA T. KAZMIERCZAK

I am delighted to write about my artwork in the context of gender and women's issues. I wish I could say that I will *show* you my works in full color and life size and then talk about them. Unfortunately, that is not an option in print, so you will see a few images that are compatible with this format. I discuss how my works came to be and what they mean to me personally and as public communications for the empowerment of women.

I deal with the uneasy topic of the male-to-female psychological abuse in adult relationships. My artworks make visible the emotional impact of persistent, deliberate coercion and psychological control over women who have been terrorized in intimate partner relationships. The prevalence of violence against women in all of its manifestations, including intimate emotional terrorism, is a major global health problem and a violation of human rights. It is no longer a private or domestic issue if women make up 53 percent of the world's population and if "between 15 percent of women in Japan and 71 percent of women in Ethiopia aged 15–49 years reported physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime," as reported by the World Health Organization (WHO 2012).

I do not intend this article to be a downer. On the contrary, I emphasize the emotional-cognitive-ethical growth that results from overcoming challenging life crises, including abuse. First, I introduce my series of works titled "A Journey of a Woman," followed by a self-portrait drawing by a woman who experienced abuse. These will illustrate how "the things that were done to me" can impact affect, cognition, health, and quality of life. Second, I specify what "the things that were done to me" mean in legal terms. Next, I concentrate on the critical awareness and the emancipatory impact of reaching out to other wise women who have experienced similar life crises and have turned their lives around. I conclude with a doable ten-step program for the empowerment of women.

## **Art and Healing: My Journey of a Woman**

When I was approached by Professor Elżbieta H. Oleksy with the idea of speaking about my artwork, I faced a dilemma. My works are not conceptual musings that speak to the viewers' intellect. Nor am I a landscape painter whose works depict the beauty and significance of human habitat. I am not a visual journalist who searches the media to find hot topics for an artistic intervention. For me, art-making is not a career, but a place within where I can find inner peace. The dilemma of speaking about my works in public is tied to the question of whether I am prepared to "go public" with grim depictions of experiences that kept me in a purgatory called intimate emotional terror. For a long time, I did not dare to reveal these experiences, but now I am dressed for the occasion. From the perspective of thirteen years of a deeply satisfying life and a nurturing relationship, I cannot help but comment that if it were not for what I had overcome, I might not have had such a meaningful connection with life and my art-making. I am also keenly aware of the fact that my journey in the literal sense of emigration and the metaphoric sense of emotional, cognitive, and ethical growth might not have ended positively, had circumstances of my life been less favorable.<sup>1</sup>

"A Journey of a Woman" is a series of artwork that began as a way of purging the poison of psychological terrorism that had destroyed my marriage and irrevocably altered my self-concept and my relationships with others. Over time, the series developed into my medium of protest against gender-based violence and included many women's tribulations. The United Nations defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (WHO 2012). When I was being brainwashed by my abusing spouse, I believed that my destiny was to keep calm and carry on. I was doing what I was brought up to do: to be a selfless homemaker. I thought I had failed miserably, because in my naïveté I did not realize that those socially constructed expectations are unreal, and attempting to fulfill those leads to self-destruction.<sup>2</sup>

In some ways I was lucky. I was an artist and I could legitimize making art for therapeutic reasons as my professional practice. Art saved my sanity, helped me walk away from my domestic "situation," and cleansed me from the emotions that gnawed at me from within (Fig. 1-1). It took me several years of intensive self-(re)education to come to terms with who I was, what I believed in, and with whom I chose to make